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THE ART OF CHARLES COTTET

Art, like religion and every other human interest, calls ever and anon for new prophets and leaders; and reforms are instituted and progress is made largely by the party of protest. The heretics of yesterday are the inspired guides of to-day, and frequently, if not usually, the false teachers of to-morrow. The favorites of the hour step into power and precedence; but as they acquire political ascen-



CHARLES COTTET
From a Photograph

dency, and as their efforts veer toward commercialism, as is so often the case, a new party of dissenters arises to combat corrupting tendencies. Otherwise art would soon become decadent, if not absolutely moribund.

History repeats itself under different names—classicism, impressionism, the story-telling picture, etc. The protestants form cliques under their own banners, foster new methods or new ideals, decry or damn with faint praise the performances of other schools, avowedly or tacitly proclaim themselves the heralds of a new régime, and create new salons. Sooner or later the leaven thus introduced works among the established bodies. The new and the old again meet on

common ground, work harmoniously for a period, and then give rise to a new race of protestants. Such is the life of art.

It is no small honor for a painter to be a recognized leader among these dissenters in art; and this is the position which Charles Cottet holds in France to-day. He is not an iconoclast, not a defamer of other men's methods and practices, not a professed innovator. His power is the influence of example, and in his quiet way, by assiduously working on the lines that conform to his own convictions as regards the true functions and methods of art, he, in conjunction with a number of other talented artists, has been working unremittingly for a decade or more, slowly but surely laying the foundation for a new and distinctive type of art in France.

Like himself, the men with whom he has associated in these efforts have won for themselves no small measure of fame. Among them

are Aman-Jean, J. E. Blanche,* Lucien Simon, René Ménard, Duhem, La Touche, and Le Sidaner—all men from whom the world has heard and from whom it will yet hear more glowing reports. They are in a sense allied in their methods with such artists as Brangwyn, Baertsoen, Vail, Frédéric, Thaulow, and Claus. All these men stand pre-eminently as

representatives of a new art; and while change is not always progress, it is safe enough to say that they have taken a positive step in the right direction.

Cottet, broad shouldered and robust, with a genial, intelligent face, adorned with an abundant reddish beard, that tends to accentuate his age, is a man who would impress one with a sense of power.

Born at Puy, in 1863, he studied for two years at the École des Beaux Arts, becoming thereafter successively the pupil of Puvis de Chavannes and M. Roll. One marvels somewhat that a man like Cottet, whose best work is characterized by somber coloring, fidelity to fact, absence of grace, and a predilection towards subjects that most people would not deem poetic or



THE MOURNERS
By Charles Cottet



THE MOURNERS
By Charles Cottet

beautiful, should emanate from the studio of Puvis de Chavannes, one of the modern masters of decorative painting. But Cottet's insistent devotion to his Brittany themes and his unswerving loyalty to his own methods are a tribute to his independence of character, and an evidence of his fitness to be a leader among the dissenters.

Cottet's art is not an art that would be popular with the multitude. It is primarily the expression of sentiment, but that sentiment has in it, in too large measure, the burden of sorrow that most people find



THE PROCESSION IN BRITTANY
By Charles Cottet

depressing. His characters are humble folk, used to toil and trouble; in a word, people of hard life. His attitude of mind reminds one of Millet, to whom the lot of the wretched was the supremest poetry. Millet's subjects were the peasants from whom he sprang, and Cottet's are the fisher folk of the Brittany shore, among whom he became domiciled, and to whom he was attracted by their simple ways, and above all, by their perilous calling and all that it means as an influence on life. Millet's art sought to invest drudgery with dignity and to picture as a charm the lot that is charmless. Cottet's art, so far as his Breton pictures are concerned—and these are his most important—presents the life of equally simple people, but emphasizes not so much this thought of penury and ignorance as the mental throes,

the hopes and fears, the piety bordering on superstition, the leave-takings, the anxious watchings, and everything incident to a life of danger on the sea. Thus Millet thought sentiment into his stolid subjects, and Cottet gives pictorial expression to the sentiment he observes.

It is a decade or more ago since Cottet went to Camaret, on the Brittany coast, and there began assiduously his studies of the life of the fishermen and their families. The locality and the people may



STUDY FOR A BRITTANY FUNERAL
By Charles Cottet

not have been wholly new to him, but on this occasion he entered heartily into the life of the people, studied their characteristics as a direct outgrowth of their environment, and was so impressed, so captivated, with what he saw, that this summer's outing became a shaping influence in his art. The wild Brittany coast, the still wilder seas that washed it, the gray and leaden skies peculiar to the district, the hardy seamen going out through necessity on their hazardous enterprises, their wives and children bidding them godspeed, and watching anxiously on the cliffs for their return, the type of character that is born of this constant tempting of danger and trusting in Providence—all these appealed to Cottet as subjects meet for art.



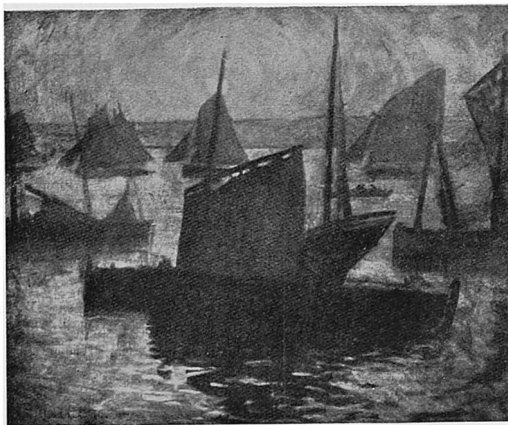
STUDY

By Charles Cottet

in the Luxembourg, of which more anon, and by many another canvas of which the motive is taken from the Brittany coast.

Cottet thus became the interpreter of a locality harsh and forbidding, and of a people no less plain and severe, and his first canvas depicting Breton life was so masterful in its draftsman-ship, so straightforward and forceful in its rendering, that it brought his work conspicuously before the jury at the Salon and won him a medal. It was a canvas of great power, but not one calculated to catch the multitude. It was neither landscape nor seascape, nor yet a story-telling picture; and yet it was a direct out-

He saw in the fisher folk of Brittany something like the charm that the American, Winslow Homer, saw in the fisher folk on the other side of the Atlantic, but his temperament is different from Homer's, and he was impelled to express, not the tense action, the moments of danger, the acts of heroism, the billow-washed cliffs, the mighty sweep and ever-present mystery of the ocean that delight the American, but rather the sentiment of all these as evidenced by their impress on the faces, the character, and the manners of the people. This is shown by his great triptych, now



CAMARET HARBOR

By Charles Cottet

growth of the coast and the sea, and it told its touching story of the people's life. It depicted simply four girls in white, the center of a group of worshipers, bearing an image of the Virgin, the figures having for a background a murky sky and a gray stone chapel. Just an incident of common life translated into the medium of color, but it was so different from the show canvases with which the Salon is usually covered, that it riveted the attention of the visitors and



LOW MASS IN BRITTANY

By Charles Cottet

marked the artist as a man from whom the public had much to expect. Be it said Cottet has not disappointed the expectation.

In the sullen sea, the misty skies, and the barren sands of the district, in the manners, habits, and costumes of the people, in their simple life, dominated by the seriousness of lot and calling, Cottet had discovered a new field for artistic effort, and he was not slow in following up this first success. Neither was he remiss or superficial in studying his sketching-ground and subjects. By repeated visits he gained an intimate knowledge of all the peculiar characteristics of the Brittany coast, the prevailing tone of sky and sea, the conformity of the land, the type of cottages, the appearance and management of

fleets of fishing-smacks, the home life of the fishermen, their religious beliefs and practices—everything needed for faithfulness of portrayal. And above all, he became literally imbued with the seriousness and sadness he everywhere found manifest.

His first winter on the coast was one of storms and devastation and death, of cholera that swept away the people and filled homes with despair. It was a harsh experience, but one that amply repaid the painter for his devotion to his art. It quickened his best impulses, broadened his horizon, and fixed definitely the line of his future



STUDY FOR CENTRAL PANEL OF TRIPTYCH

By Charles Cottet

Picture in Luxembourg Museum

efforts. Every year since he has spent several months on the Brittany coast, and every year his Breton pictures have been marked by a deeper interest and a more vital import.

"The domain he has conquered," says an appreciative critic, "is vast and rich, as everything is which is near akin to nature and to life. This 'Pays de la Mer,' of which he became the moving and conscious interpreter, this Breton coast, whose tragic aspects and whose simpler phases he excels in portraying—these belong to him by right, for he has made them his by his acuteness of vision and his honest powers of observation. He has discovered and placed in bold relief all there is of heroic grandeur in these types and these landscapes, and that with the simplicity proper to an artist of high race. The outcome of

all his labors is seen in the triptych exhibited by him in 1898 in the Salon of the Société Nationale, one of the most notable works produced during the last decade. Cottet's genius has developed simply in normal fashion, and he has always been careful to 'know himself.' Apart from draftsmanship and coloring, and beyond all questions of materialism, he has found the moral essence of things, without ceasing to be a painter; that is to say, in all he has done he has used none but the purest plastic methods. This in itself is a fresh conquest on which he may be unreservedly congratulated." Words of truth.

There is in his work no display of mere technique, no striving for brilliancy of effect, nothing literary or romantic. He strives, and he strives wisely, to invest his canvases with interest by strictly legitimate means. His compositions are all well balanced, his draftsmanship is



STUDY

By Charles Cottet



THE NIGHT BOATS

By Charles Cottet

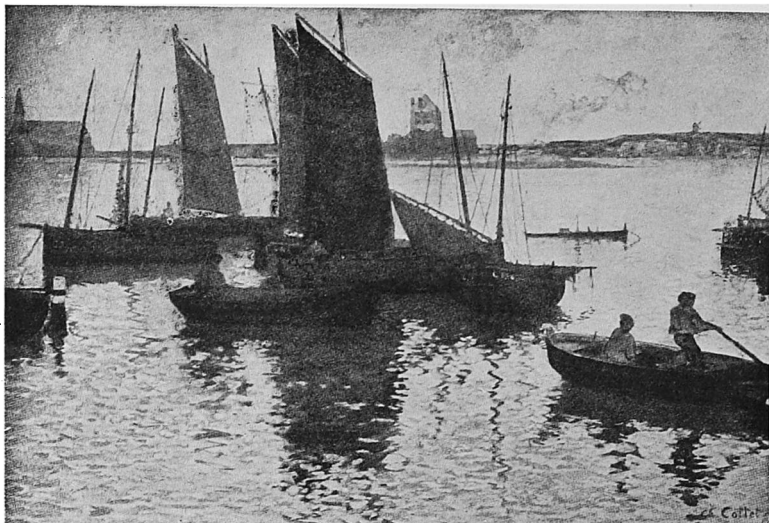
faultless, his coloring is harmonious rather than rich, and his pictures all have the unity that springs from concentration of purpose. He is never guilty of perpetrating studio inventions, but gets his inspiration direct from nature, which he does not seek to idealize or beautify, but which he depicts with all the stern realism of uncompromising fact.

There is small need of referring in detail to his many Breton pictures. Whether it be his "Port of Camaret," in the Luxembourg, in which he gives us a placid sea dotted with craft; or his magnificent triptych "Land of the Sea," also in the Luxembourg; or his "Fires of St. John," showing a group of women and children huddled about the flames; or his "Low Mass in Brittany," hung in this year's Salon, showing women in their hooded cloaks silhouetted against a gray sky and plodding over a desolate heath toward a gray chapel; or his "Procession in Brittany," depicting one of the peculiar rites of these simple people; or his "Vieille Aveugle," showing an old woman in sober garb and white cap, plodding her way over a cobble pavement; or his "A Brittany Funeral," with its group of stolid, awe-inspired mourners and its wonderful expression of solemnity and sorrow; or his "Le Pardon," with its procession of six white-clad girls bearing on a litter the image of the Saviour, another of the peculiar rites of the people—whatever be the motive of these Brittany pictures, they are all faithful interpretations of a unique phase of being, they all have their touch of genuine sentiment, they are all dominated by the same note of sadness; and yet, withal, they have the intensity of interest that inheres in actual life simply and forcefully expressed. The artist's earnestness and devotion of purpose is everywhere manifest; and while we may not all welcome the note of melancholy, while some of us may object to his dark-toned color schemes, we can but admire the man for his faithful delineations and for the power with which he expresses the strange, sad sentiment with which he is impressed.

While thus passing over Cottet's many important canvases, I am impelled to dwell briefly on two pictures, his great triptych, "Au Pays de la Mer," which may be regarded as the culmination of all his Breton studies, and his "Vieux Cheval sur la Lande," which may be taken as fairly representative of a class of subjects which has a peculiar fascination for the artist. This latter canvas I have heard called "The Present-Day Angelus." It is simply a pictorial expression for the idea of desolation, abandonment. It is a mournful landscape, in itself desolate and forbidding. The leaden sky betokens an approaching storm, the blackness being accentuated by livid streaks of light. All this simply the background for a solitary old white horse, bony and unkempt, his mane and tail blown in the wind, nibbling a scant meal on the barren ground.

It is a case of bald, harsh, unpleasant realism, but it is the very essence of pathos. The spectator's mind is turned away from a consideration of mere human lot to contemplate the same conditions, the same wretchedness and misery, that obtain in the brute creation. Whether we consider it as a pictorial expression for the irony of fate, the succumbing of the least fit, or an arraignment of man for his indifference to brute comfort, the power of the picture is tremendous.

Schreyer has done something similar as an exemplification of desertion, abandonment. The reader may remember his war picture, depicting a wagon stuck in a water-soaked plain, driver and one horse shot and lying dead in the mud, and the other horse still hitched to the wagon and famished, winnowing, with gaunt sides, for assistance. This picture, too, is one to touch the spectator to tears. But Schreyer's horse is the victim of chance, accident, the catastrophe that may or may not come. Cottet's is an instance of the lot of the



RAYONS DU SOIR: PORT DE CAMARET

By Charles Cottet

In the Luxembourg Museum

unfit, the unserviceable, the worn out; and the abject misery without mitigating circumstance, the hopelessness without one ray of cheering prospect, the outcast loneliness that is cut off from fellow sympathies—all these are common to the lot of the unfavored human multitude. This picture alone would be sufficient reason for classing Cottet among the greatest painters of the day.

Cottet learned on the Brittany coast that all fishermen's departures are serious, and that as a consequence of the very calling of the people their lives are touched with sorrow. It is the life of the fishermen, this poem in minor key, that he tells in the famous triptych in the Luxembourg. The central panel depicts "The Farewell Feast." Around a table in a little bare-walled room, through whose window one looks out on the night and the sea, friends and relatives of differ-



THE MOURNERS
By Charles Cottet

ent age and sex are gathered, each face touched with anxious foreboding, marked with a sorrow inherent in partings, and yet lit up with the hope that struggles for mastery with dread and fear. To the left are "Those Who Depart," a group of hardy seamen, motionless and stolid in their resignation, sailing away through the night, the boat skimming through a haze of blue and marking the deep with its phosphorescent track. To the right are "Those Who Remain," a little band of mothers and maidens, sitting on a surf-beaten bluff and gazing sadly toward the distant horizon, where the spectator is left to imagine the husbands, fathers, and brothers are disappearing from view, perhaps never to return. This is the simple story, the whole story of the remarkable picture.

The three panels are a unity in conception and execution. They have a common horizon, a uniform color scheme, a reiteration of the same thought and sentiment. One gets three views designed to emphasize the same circumstance, and all unified in a masterful way so as to leave nothing to tell of these

periodic temptings of danger and of the heartaches that mark them. It is small wonder that the triptych, when first exhibited, caused a sensation in Parisian art circles, and that it should soon have found its way into one of the most celebrated public galleries of France. It is profound in its thought and sentiment, the conception of a true poet, and an unusually remarkable example of pictorial achievement.

There is a brighter side to Cottet's art, but this calls for scant

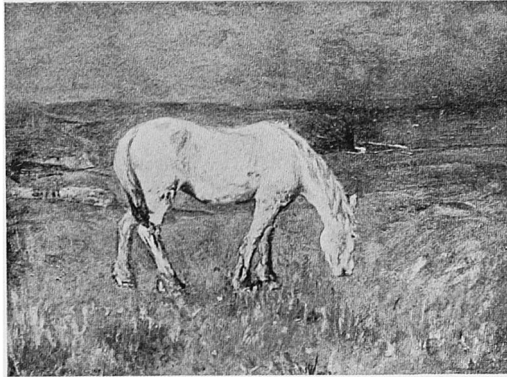


AU PAYS DE LA MER: VIEILLE AVEUGLE
By Charles Cottet

mention, in view of the fact that it is his pictures of Brittany sailor-life by which he won fame, and with which his name is most intimately associated. He spent a winter in Egypt, and brought back studies and finished pictures luminous with the light and gorgeous with the colors of the Orient, faithful transcriptions of scenery, and equally true and interesting depictions of types. He visited the Jura Mountains, and gives us pictures of alpine grandeur, simple in treatment and thoroughly poetical and truthful. Like many another artist, he has made Venice a Mecca, and has given us a series of Venetian scenes, synthetical and true, and distinctly individual. In these pictures, which contrast singularly with the artist's more sober Breton scenes, he has used a rich palette, at times bordering on splendor of color; but however they may be unlike the canvases that have given him his distinctive place in the coterie of artist dissenters, one may see in them all the same cleverness of composition, the same vigor of brush work, and the same force and character.

Success as well as honor has attended Cottet's efforts. His studio on the Avenue of the Observatory is extensive and well lighted, and is equipped in a way to suggest the artist's well-merited prosperity. Here he works with an industry and an earnestness rarely equaled among Parisian artists, turning out comparatively few pictures, but commanding for those he does produce unusually good prices. He also has allied himself with an art school, taking a class and seeking in every way to inculcate those principles and practices which have resulted in his own enviable rank among the present-day artists of France.

ARTHUR ANDERSON JAYNES.



VIEUX CHEVAL SUR LA LANDE
By Charles Cottet